

Where Codependency Leaves Off and Kindness Begins

Susan Peabody

I was codependent for many years and then Robin Norwood, who wrote *Women Who Love Too Much*, straightened me out. In her book, she encouraged women to learn how to “become selfish.” Being an eager student, I learned this lesson well and got pretty good at it. Then the Holy Spirit came to me, and I was filled with an overwhelming desire to be kind, generous and charitable once again. I was happy about this, but I was also confused. How could I tell the difference between the codependent love and genuine love. And how could I avoid loving “too much.”

To answer this question, I had to do a lot of soul searching. This took years, but eventually I came to understand that codependent love is spurious—of illegitimate birth—and genuine love is a gift from God passed on to others through us. You might say it is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. To tell when I am doing one and not the other, I look for the following clues.

Pseudo Generosity

Generosity stemming from codependent love arises out of fear, guilt or obligation. (If I do not do this, that or the other thing, I am bad.) Charity born of the Holy Spirit comes from a person with well-established self-esteem. They are usually doing for others only what they would do for themselves under other circumstances.

Balance

Codependent love is exclusive to others—there is none left over for ourselves. (The second great commandment makes it clear that you shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:39), and, of course, charity begins at home.) Therefore, if I am buying presents for others but refusing to accept them for myself, something is wrong.

Anonymity

Codependent love wants recognition. For instance, the codependent can easily rattle off a list of things she or has done for others. Charity born of the Holy Spirit manifests itself in an atmosphere of shyness and begs for secrecy.

Buying Love

Codependent love is an attempt to get something return. Will you love me if I take care of you? I need to be careful when I do things for others that there are no strings attached. Charity born of the Holy Spirit desires no personal payback.

Impact

Recipients of codependent love are outwardly grateful, but inwardly they sense the dishonesty of the giver or at least the hidden agenda. This often leads to resentment and what I call biting the hand that feeds them. It also leads to laziness and dependency on your care taking.

On the other hand, those who receive charity born of the Holy Spirit sense the purity and love from whence it flows. They are not resentful and they do not feel obligated. They, along with the giver, have a feeling of completion and wholeness. Intimacy is achieved between two human beings which has a wonderful sense of authenticity. So if the recipients of your kindness are not thriving they are either jerk or just reacting to your codependent love.

Passing it On

Recipients of codependent love want to hoard the gift. They sense that the supply can be cut off at anytime because it is not genuine. Love born of the Holy Spirit creates a desire in the receiver to pass it on. "Freely, freely you have received. Freely, Freely give." When the recipient of your love is as generous to others as you are to him or her, this is a good sign.

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Of course, there is always a fine line between codependent love and love born of the Holy Spirit. This is because we are human. We are not the Holy Spirit. They Holy Spirit only flows through us. But as one surrenders to the Holy Spirit more fully, the fruit of the spirit will be uncontaminated and it will truly feed others as well as ourselves. Like the water that does make us thirst again, the hunger satisfied by true Christian love is everlasting. So I do not condemn myself when I am loving for profit. Sometimes I just can't help myself. But I also try to guard against it and love in more wholesome ways.

